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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 ALGIERS 000984

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KISL](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: THE KABYLIE: RELUCTANT REFUGE FOR TERRORISTS

REF: A. ALGIERS 918

[B](#). ALGIERS 467

[C](#). ALGIERS 317

[D](#). 2007 ALGIERS 1618

[E](#). ALGIERS 523 (AND PREVIOUS)

[F](#). 2007 ALGIERS 1749

Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: A string of suicide bombings just east of Algiers (ref A) has brought renewed focus on the Kabylie mountains and the disproportionate amount of terrorist activity occurring there. A fiercely independent center of Berber culture and tradition for centuries, the Kabylie region has served as a perennial refuge for anti-establishment guerrillas who take advantage of its relative lawlessness and rugged terrain. Today the romance of the "maquis" -- the mountainous areas from which Algerian "freedom fighters" launched the struggle for independence against the French -- has faded, as the Kabyle people grow tired and angry at the Islamic extremists in their midst. Today's terrorists exploit the same lawless maquis that generations did before them, but they are largely new arrivals and opportunists whose principles the Kabyles do not share and whose objectives they do not understand. The Kabyles helped expel the national Gendarmerie from the region in 2001, feeling neglected by a central government they believed was more interested in oppressing the Berber culture than in providing for their security. Today they suffer from that resulting power vacuum, feeling victimized by the terrorists who take cover in the hills around their homes. The result is an appetite for the central government to return and restore order to the Kabylie, most visibly demonstrated by the highest voter turnout among young people of any region of the country in the November 2007 local elections. But some have charged openly that the government is simply not nimble enough to take advantage of this opportunity, lacking the competence to redeploy the Gendarmerie and army to retake areas of the Kabylie they secured in the late 1990s but have since lost. END SUMMARY.

TAKING THE MAQUIS

[1](#)2. (U) The foot of the Kabylie mountain range lies less than 50 kilometers east of Algiers and is the traditional home of Kabyle Berber tribes. The geographic difficulty in controlling the rugged mountainous zone is amplified by the fierce independent streak of the Kabyle character, which has spread throughout the Algerian population writ large -- so much so that the expression "taking the maquis" has come to

mean stubborn, resolute rejection in common parlance. For centuries, the Kabylie has afforded excellent cover to fighters of various stripes, most recently Algerians fighting French colonial forces in the 1950s and Algerian Islamists attacking government forces in the 1990s. In the last few years, the region has been the focal point of sustained, often vicious violence. On September 4 the independent French daily El Watan listed 18 significant terrorist incidents in the Kabylie region between October 12, 2006 and August 28, 2008, including kidnappings, ambushes and bombings. Because of the security situation, virtually no American diplomat has ventured overland to the Kabylie capital of Tizi Ouzou in more than 15 years. Recently, a Dutch diplomat made the journey to conduct a consular visit to a Tizi Ouzou jail. In addition to the armed escorts normally assigned to a diplomatic delegation traveling by road outside the capital, the government insisted that he travel in an armored personnel carrier. In spite of that, many of our local employees (LES) who hail from the region traverse the only highway between Algiers and Tizi Ouzou on a regular basis.

ROADBLOCKS AND ROADSIDE RECONNAISSANCE

13. (U) One of our local staff who has worked at the Embassy for 17 years recently made several trips to his home village of Beni Yenni in the mountains southeast of Tizi Ouzou. He observed that the drive to the village should take approximately two hours under normal road conditions, but usually takes at least three. He must pass an average of ten

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military and police checkpoints between Algiers and Tizi Ouzou, and traffic congestion is exacerbated because a portion of the highway is also the main trucking route between Algiers and the eastern commercial hubs of Setif and Constantine. The drive back is no better: the father of a youth program participant who traveled to Algiers on July 31 for a reception at the Embassy told us it took him nearly three hours to drive from just outside Tizi Ouzou -- barely 100 kilometers.

14. (C) According to our staff the drive is usually uneventful, if slow. However, our colleague from Beni Yenni told us that whenever the army launches offensives against terrorist camps in the mountains, it can be seen massing troops in fields along the highway several days in advance, and the staging of ambulances always signals the start of operations. He saw such a mobilization during a return drive to Algiers on August 7. The day before, the military encircled Tizi Ouzou and several nearby villages and warned residents to be alert for military operations in the coming days. Upon returning to Algiers, our colleague called his father, a retired Algerian official, who told him he could see and hear helicopters in an area not far away near a river, along with the sounds of battle. Press sources the following day reported that the military had raided a terrorist camp and killed a dozen terrorists.

THE KABYLE: FIGHTING FOR CULTURAL INDEPENDENCE

15. (U) The Kabylie Berbers are the second-largest group of Berber tribes in North Africa, with millennia-old traditions still evident in their unique language, dress, jewelry and music. Fiercely independent and loyal to their culture, the Kabyles have periodically clashed with the central government. Violent riots erupted in 1998 when Kabyle singer Lounes Matoub was murdered by masked assailants at a roadblock. Demonstrators claimed the government assassinated Matoub for his outspoken opposition to a law making Arabic the only official language of Algeria. Others blamed Islamic extremists for his death, alleging he was killed for his irreverent and non-religious music and lyrics. In 2001, violent clashes again broke out across the Kabylie after a

student died in police custody. These clashes, resulting in over 100 deaths, came to be known as the Black Spring, an allusion to the Berber Spring of the 1980s when civil society rallied to lift the restrictions placed on Berber culture. The Black Spring of 2001 culminated in a massive march of Kabyles from the mountains to Algiers. Police confronted what was publicly deemed an "invasion" of the capital, which led to a ban on marches in Algiers that is still in effect. The government offered some capitulation when, in October 2001, the national Gendarmerie were largely withdrawn from the Kabylie, and traditional, local democratic assemblies known as "Arouch" sprang up throughout the region.

TOTAL LACK OF INVESTMENT

¶6. (U) Today, the region is plagued by unemployment and lack of social mobility, leaving young men "bored and frustrated," one colleague said. With no jobs, infrastructure or even security in their villages, the young men "have only the mosque and crime to turn to," he added. In the September 4 issue of El Watan, local Kabyle parliamentarian Tahar Issadei tried to portray the terrorist threat in his home region as a "media exaggeration," but then admitted that "there is a cruel lack of infrastructure in the region." Issadei, the president of the APC (local legislative council) of Yakouren, despaired that "It is a catastrophe -- there is a total lack of investment." The paper also quoted a local teacher, who lamented that the only businesses providing jobs were private builders, and that everyone works in construction. It is perhaps not coincidental that Algeria's suicide rate (ref C) is highest in the Kabylie, and the rate of exodus of young people is also high. One of our staff reported that his village has lost nearly a third of its population over the last five years as young people left for urban centers and foreign shores. Another Embassy employee from the Kabylie blamed the government for the lawlessness exploited by the terrorists, saying "they found refuge in our mountains, and in the fact that the government neglected the region for so

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long." Anecdotaly, our Consular colleagues note that for a number of reasons, a large percentage of the Embassy's Diversity Visa caseload comes from Tizi Ouzou. A professor from the University of Tizi Ouzou told us on August 12 that his region is enthralled with things American, and that English is becoming the preferred foreign language of choice amongst young people. "They need hope," he said, "and their hopeful dreams are no longer of France, but of America." Issadei summed up his region's efforts to promote tourism and economic growth as continuously frustrated by the security situation. "Without security we simply cannot attract investment," he said.

WHO ARE THE TERRORISTS?

¶7. (C) Many of the terrorists of the 1990s who hid in the Kabylie were fighters seasoned in battle against Soviet forces in 1980s Afghanistan. Our contacts tell us that an increasing number of terrorists hiding in the Kabylie today are Algerians who fought in the Islamist insurgency of the 1990s and were released from prison under the government's national reconciliation program (ref D). The Berbers of the region insist that the terrorists are not indigenous Kabyles, but opportunistic outsiders from elsewhere in Algeria and even from abroad who are taking advantage of the difficult terrain to evade capture. On August 6, one of our colleagues visiting his family for a wedding asked the locals if terrorists were recruiting from the villages above Tizi Ouzou. They universally said no, insisting the terrorists are not Kabyles but are "recycled" fighters of the 1990s recently released from prison. They say that the "repentant" 1990s-era terrorists were not able to re-assimilate into Algerian society, so they returned to their old ways. Several recent suicide bombers have been identified as former

convicted terrorists, some released under the national reconciliation amnesty (ref E).

18. (C) Many Kabyles ascribe to a conspiracy theory that holds that the Algerian government is complicit in the region's instability, and uses persistent lawlessness to justify oppressing the Kabyle people, keep Berber autonomy movements in check and expand police powers nationwide. Today, however, our Kabyle colleagues tell us they feel victimized by the Islamic extremists who move among them but are not really of them. They talk about false checkpoints, a common terrorist tactic, and of cousins who have been stopped by Islamists. The most common use of the roadblocks is to sermonize: the Islamists chastise men who allow the women in their cars to dress too liberally, and they castigate passengers for drinking alcohol, listening to music or acting too Western. The Islamists manning the false checkpoints often ask for money, and generally allow families to pass unscathed but warn of future retribution if they do not behave more devoutly. In addition to sermonizing and raising cash, the checkpoints are sometimes used as means to enhance the logistics of terror cells. One of our colleague's cousins was ejected from his truck, given a small amount of money to hire transport to his village, and provided a general description of an area in Tizi Ouzou where he could find his vehicle several days later -- which he did. The most extreme use of the false checkpoint is for violence: another of the same colleague's cousins was returning to his village on holiday from military service when he was taken from his vehicle and his family was told to go home without him. His body was found in a riverbed later that week.

REBELS WITHOUT A CAUSE

19. (C) The August 6 wedding-goers also insisted that stories of cooperation by Kabylie villagers with the terrorists are exaggerated. While they do see Islamists walking publicly in the streets and interacting with the locals, they assert that more than 15 years of brutal experience has taught the Kabyles that to oppose or confront these men only invites retribution. El Watan noted that the region has a particularly high rate of kidnappings, for example. Thus, a certain level of tolerance and acquiescence also focuses the fight against the government rather than the people. One of our colleagues who attended the wedding said that during his conversations with family most agreed that, in contrast to

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the 1990s, they do not know what the terrorists are fighting for today. At the outset of the dark years following the cancellation of elections in 1991, the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) and later the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) fought in the mountains against what seemed to many Algerians to be a corrupt, oppressive government. Most of the initial targets were government organs. Today, while targets also tend to be government security forces, civilians are increasingly caught in the carnage. Moreover, the objectives of today's terrorists are unclear and do not enjoy significant popular support among the Kabyles. "There is a gap" between the terrorists and the people, one of our Kabyle colleagues stated, "we simply don't know what they want." He added that in Tizi Ouzou, the language spoken on the street is Kabyle Berber, not Arabic, further isolating the Islamists from the locals.

RETURNING TO THE NATIONAL FOLD?

110. (U) One of our colleagues admitted that the extremists have been able to exploit an almost innate antipathy among the Kabyles toward the government. As long as the extremists do not harm the population, he observed, what they do to government forces is of little concern to local inhabitants. That attitude is changing, he claimed. With every trip to his home village, he sees signs of increased cooperation

between government forces and the Kabyle population. For example, he noted that drivers are more cooperative and interactive with troops at the security checkpoints. While waiting in line at a checkpoint outside of Tizi Ouzou on August 6, he saw a local resident give several bottles of water to the soldiers standing guard in the hot sun. On August 11 Reuters quoted a resident of the Kabylie beach town of Azzeffoun, who said of the security forces moving through the region, "as long as they protect the people and do not beat them up, they are welcome."

¶11. (C) Voting patterns also suggest that the Kabyle attitude toward the government is improving. In the November 2007 local elections, otherwise marked by widespread apathy and low voter turnout (ref F), the Kabylie region reported the highest youth turnout in the country. Ruling coalition parties like the National Liberation Front (FLN) and National Democratic Rally (RND) made gains over the two traditionally regionalist Berber parties, the Socialist Forces Front (FFS) and the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD). Part of this shift, our contacts in both the FFS and RCD tell us, was also due to those parties' inability to produce results, either because of internal divisions or government intimidation. As one of our Kabyle colleagues said, "people see no results from the regional parties, and so the political landscape is more fragmented today." He said even the local Arouch have been discredited and are largely ignored, and the Kabyles are sufficiently frustrated that they are cautiously willing to give the government another chance.

KEEP ON KEEPIN' ON

¶12. (U) Despite the checkpoints, real and false, the threats of terrorist attacks, and the bombardments launched by the government, the Kabyles have proved as resilient as the extremists in their midst. One of our colleagues spoke with a cousin who had been on a bus in Tigzirt when a bomb exploded in the city in early August. The cousin said the bus driver simply continued with his route, and even kept his music playing. Another colleague, who had taken her family on vacation in the Kabylie, noted that throughout the several tense weeks of August, the beaches were still full. "We are beyond fear," she said, "The bombers make us angry, but we do not fear their bombs anymore. Sadly, we are accustomed to it." In April an Algerian journalist affiliated with a major Western news outlet described to us a trip he had just taken through the Kabylie region. He spoke of an idyllic scene in one town where men drank tea at an outdoor cafe, workers swept sidewalks and painted lampposts, and wedding processions wended through the streets, all while the distinct sound of artillery bombardment rang through the nearby hills. "It was as if it was just another public works project," he mused.

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COMMENT: OPPORTUNITY KNOCKING?

¶13. (C) The government in Algiers has an opportunity to reassert itself in the Kabylie region in the face of what appears to be a greater degree of support -- or at least resignation -- from the local population. Our staff and contacts who live in the Kabylie say that today's maquis is the domain of opportunist terrorists whose presence has become a serious nuisance, preventing stability and thwarting efforts to attract desperately needed investment. While a series of much-needed infrastructure projects in the region testifies to the government's awareness of the need for economic development, the rift between the Kabyles and the central government remains wide, and will take time and effort to bridge. To reestablish law and order in the region and take back the maquis, the government must essentially "redo work already done ten years ago," as a September 1 Liberte cover story put it. The Liberte article doubted the

government's ability to recognize and respond to the opportunity. The main challenge for the regime in Algiers will be to take advantage of this opening while treading as lightly as possible on Berber cultural pride. To do so will require a sensitivity that has little precedent in the past several decades.

PEARCE